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Author(s): Stephen L. Newman

Source: *Polity*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Autumn, 1989), pp. 75-96

Published by: Palgrave Macmillan Journals

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3234847>

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Liberalism & the Divided Mind of the American Right*

Stephen L. Newman

York University

The U.S. is without a Burkean tradition of conservatism, and instead, as Louis Hartz and others have said, has a conservatism grounded in Lockean liberalism. The recent revival of political conservatism, marked by the twice successful candidacy of Ronald Reagan for President, points up the dilemmas in this conservatism: it must either reach back to its liberal heritage for intellectual sustenance, or it must reject that past. The first strategy, this article argues, is potentially self-defeating, while the second breeds contradiction by making conservatives into radical innovators. The new conservatives, the essay continues, have tried to have it both ways. They have sought at once to embrace a libertarianism for which the modern state is anathema and a moralism drawn largely from an illiberal religious fundamentalism. In the end, the author concludes, the new conservatism's pursuit of a morally regenerate republic neither transcends nor resolves the dilemma that plagues conservatives in American politics.

Stephen L. Newman is Associate Professor of Political Science at York University. He is author of Liberalism at Wits' End: The Libertarian Revolt Against the Modern State.

American conservatism is a paradox. Conservatives, as Burke taught us, are champions of tradition, partisans in a war waged against the received wisdom of the past by the proud and reckless children of modernity. America, however, is a modern nation without a Burkean past to defend.

*The author thanks Leonard Hochberg for his comments and suggestions.

The only tradition available to American conservatives is, as Louis Hartz pointed out, the liberal tradition. Ironically, conservatism in America subscribes to the same political principles as its ideological antagonists. From a philosophical vantage point, this causes American politics to resemble a family quarrel: Locke's heirs squabbling over their common patrimony.

After World War II conservatives joined with liberals in the vigorous prosecution of the cold war and grudgingly accepted the fundamentals of the welfare state carved out earlier by the New Deal. Not even the dramatic expansion of the welfare state in the 1960s provoked an immediate response. When Richard Nixon entered the White House in 1968, it was politics as usual, leading one thoughtful observer to conclude that liberals and conservatives were to be distinguished by their partisan interests rather than their political ideals.¹ If ideology was not yet at an end, it surely seemed on the road to irrelevance.

Viewed against this background, the recent conservative revival culminating in the election and re-election of Ronald Reagan appears all the more fascinating. Not since the debate over the New Deal has ideology played so strong a role in American politics. And like conservative opposition to the New Deal, the new conservatism of the Reagan era is *principled* as well as *partisan*. In challenging the programs and policies of past administrations, it repudiates what Lowi calls the "public philosophy" of the modern liberal state. But the conservatives who would make war on liberalism in America face a dilemma. They must either repair to the liberal tradition itself for their intellectual armaments, or else turn their backs on that tradition. If the former strategy is potentially self-defeating, the latter breeds contradiction; it makes conservatives into radical innovators.

The new conservatives have embraced both horns of their dilemma. On one side there are the libertarians, self-described champions of the liberal tradition for whom the modern state is anathema. Regarding statism as a political heresy, they have set out to cleanse the temple and restore American liberalism to first principles. Their allies in the crusade against Big Government are the moralists of the New Right, many of whom receive their ideological orientation from an illiberal religious fundamentalism. In contrast with the libertarians, these political zealots are more concerned with the status of moral and religious values in American life than with the status of liberalism. Their pursuit of a morally

1. Theodore J. Lowi, *The End of Liberalism*, 2d ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), p. 51.

regenerate polity leads them to look beyond the liberal tradition to a prophetic republic inspired by divine law and fulfilling a God-given destiny among the nations of the earth. While the new conservatism is not without its share of politicians willing to compromise ideology in the exercise of power, its energy resides in the ideological fervor and intense commitment of those true-believers for whom compromise is tantamount to defeat.

I.

The libertarian complaint against statism has a familiar ring.² The liberal tradition has always been somewhat ambivalent toward government. On the one hand, liberal theorists have usually deemed some form of civil government necessary to the security of life and property. In Locke's view, only the promulgation and enforcement of law by a universally recognized authority can guarantee the peace. At the same time, liberals tend to regard the state with suspicion. After all, power wielded in behalf of the governed might as easily be turned against them. Revolutionary war pamphleteer Tom Paine captured the essence of the liberal dilemma when he wrote in *Common Sense* that "society in every state is a blessing, but government even in its best state is but a necessary evil."³

Libertarian conservatives draw upon this traditional liberal ambivalence toward government to deliver a harsh critique of the modern state. Pointing at Washington, they charge that the Lockean guarantor of life and property has grown into the biggest thief of all. They portray the state as a proud and grossly swollen leviathan wreaking havoc in the economy and guilty of arbitrarily invading the rights of its citizens. Libertarians prefer their government bound and the marketplace unfettered. Personal freedom is their highest political value, realized through the absence of formal constraints on individual behavior. This accounts largely for their virulent antistatism and also explains why they prize free market capitalism so highly. Unlike government, which ultimately relies on coercion, the market operates on a principle of voluntarism—at least in a purely formal sense. This is enough to satisfy the libertarian notion of freedom. Obsessed with the coercive state, libertarian thinkers are oblivious to the effects of inequality in the market which can translate so-

2. The discussion of libertarian thought and politics which follows is drawn from my *Liberalism at Wits' End: The Libertarian Revolt Against the Modern State* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984).

3. Tom Paine, *Common Sense*, (New York: Doubleday, 1960), p. 13.

called “negative liberty” into the virtual negation of liberty for the economically disadvantaged.⁴

Generally speaking, libertarians divide into two camps. One camp, composed of “minarchists,” favors a constitutionally limited minimal government akin to the night watchman state of the last century. The other, calling itself “anarcho-capitalist,” considers even the minimal state too much to bear and instead proposes a variety of anarchism in which private police forces and private courts compete for clients in a free market. The debate between the camps may seem fanciful to an observer, but the participants are in deadly earnest. An unlikely amount of ink has been spilled in argument over the likelihood of war among competing police forces and disputing the feasibility of a privately owned nuclear deterrent.⁵

However fanciful or curiously anachronistic libertarian political theory may seem, it is no tattered refugee from the lunatic fringe of academic discourse. Thanks largely to Robert Nozick’s *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, libertarian concerns occupy a prominent place in the world of contemporary political philosophy.⁶ Moreover, libertarian rhetoric, barely audible since the campaign against the New Deal, has reemerged in American electoral politics, most notably with Ronald Reagan, and it appears to possess considerable appeal.

Perhaps the best measure of libertarian strength is the electoral record of the Libertarian Party (LP). When the party was founded in 1972, its presidential candidate, philosopher John Hospers, was able to mount a challenge in only two states. He won a mere 5,000 popular votes and but one Electoral College vote, due to the defection of a Republican Elector from Virginia. Eight years later, LP candidate Ed Clark was listed on the

4. See, for example, Friedrich Hayek on liberty in *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 133, 137. I discuss the libertarian concept of negative liberty in *Liberalism at Wits’ End*, pp. 128–37. It is also to be noted that although libertarians are acutely sensitive to the use and abuse of power by the state, they are oblivious to the exercise of power by the private corporation. They strenuously insist that the absence of physical coercion in the work place and in the market leaves the wage-dependent worker perfectly free and grants the passive consumer a kind of sovereignty over production. Cf. Murray Rothbard, *Power and Market* (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, Inc., 1970), pp. 79–80 and John Hospers, *Libertarianism: A Philosophy for Tomorrow* (Los Angeles: Nash, 1971), pp. 221–22.

5. For a defense of anarcho-capitalism, see Murray Rothbard, *For a New Liberty: The Libertarian Manifesto*, revised ed. (New York: Collier Books, 1978); also, David Friedman, *The Machinery of Freedom* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

6. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, (New York: Basic Books, 1974). Nozick’s book, famous as a reply to John Rawls’s *Theory of Justice*, should also be read as a minarchist refutation of the anarcho-capitalist position.

ballot in all fifty states and polled just over a million votes nationwide. In under a decade, the LP had established itself as the third largest political party in the United States. Surveying the 1980 results, optimistic party leaders predicted major party status before the year 2000.⁷

At first glance the LP platform reveals a seeming ideological eclecticism. Its economic planks are decidedly conservative in a free market direction, calling for an end to the welfare state and full deregulation of the economy. On defense, however, it parts company with conservative cold warriors by proposing to reduce the military establishment to a minimal defensive force and insisting on termination of all foreign commitments. Finally, in opposition to New Right moralism, libertarians call for the repeal of all laws touching on private morality. They would legalize the "victimless crimes" of prostitution, gambling, and the sale and use of narcotics, activities described in Nozick's choice phrase as "capitalist acts among consenting adults." By joining economic libertarianism with civil libertarianism and antimilitarism, the partisans of the LP claim to have moved politics beyond the conventional dialogue between left and right.⁸

In fact it would be more accurate to say that they have pitted the Old Right against the New Right. Modern libertarians follow in the footsteps of men like Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, and Albert Jay Nock, leading critics of socialism abroad and of the New Deal at home in the 1930s. Their earlier rejection of paternalistic statism in the western democracies was provoked at least in part by the ominous example of totalitarianism then recently arrived in Europe. Intellectually, these spokesmen for the Old Right represent a bygone era in American politics when conservatism was defined by adherence to the principles of classical liberalism. As historian George Nash recounts, the antistatism of the Old Right was partially eclipsed after World War II by the emergence of a new generation of conservatives obsessed with fighting communism.⁹ The New Right of the 1950s retained the economic libertarianism of its predecessor, but welcomed the enhancement of the state's military and police powers to combat enemies foreign and domestic. The still more re-

7. On the Libertarian party, see Peter Collier, "The Next American Revolution: The Libertarian Party Wants to Set You Free," *New West*, 27 August 1979; also, George Friedman and Gary McDowell, "The Libertarian Movement in America," *Journal of Contemporary Studies*, 6 (Summer 1983): 47-64.

8. The 1980 LP platform is reprinted in Donald Bruce Johnson, *National Party Platforms of 1980* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982).

9. George C. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, (New York: Basic Books, 1976), ch. 2 and 3.

cent New Right of the 1980s has added a strong dose of religious moralism to conservative ideology. Although it too roundly condemns government intervention in the marketplace, its partisans have no qualms about recommending state action to protect endangered family values.

What distinguishes the LP is its consistent antistatism. Libertarians shun domestic moralism and cold war militarism for the same reasons they condemn the welfare state. In their view, once government strays from the tasks of protecting life and property, it inevitably becomes a threat to both, hence the party's opposition to military adventures and its support of unconventional, "alternative" life styles. Libertarians hope that their unorthodox mix of economic and cultural laissez faire will attract a diverse constituency from across the political spectrum united in its desire to be left alone by the state.

Yet the promise of freedom that libertarianism holds out to nonconformists and moral dissidents will not bear close scrutiny. Consider, for example, that libertarian political theory equates the right of free speech with the property right of individuals to own or lease the means of publicizing their views. Under this scheme, any would-be speaker without the financial resources to arrange a hall, purchase airtime on television, or publish a book is simply out of luck.¹⁰ By analogy, the enjoyment of any civil right becomes contingent on possessing the means necessary to exercise it effectively. In essence, persons without property are also without rights.

Consider too that while libertarians oppose state-sponsored discrimination, they have little to say about discrimination in the marketplace. On the contrary, they maintain that employers are well within their rights to refuse someone a job because of that person's race, religion, gender, or sexual preference. Concerning social prejudice, libertarian theorists are quick to suggest that discriminatory practices will doubtless prove economically inefficient. Confident that economic rationality will ultimately prevail, they put their trust in the profit motive rather than affirmative action.¹¹ Curiously, thinkers who can imagine a market catering to every conceivable taste and lifestyle seem unable to envision a market for prejudice as well.

The libertarian political movement of the 1980s has its origins three decades earlier in scattered circles of right-wing individualists schooled on books like Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* and Ayn Rand's *Atlas*

10. See the argument concerning free speech in Rothbard, *For a New Liberty*, p. 43.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 39–44.

Shrugged.¹² The first and unsuccessful attempt at a national organization of libertarians was Murray Rothbard's Radical Libertarian Alliance in 1969. The LP came into being through the efforts of a small group of renegade Young Republicans who left the GOP in 1972, outraged by President Nixon's imposition of wage and price controls. The budding libertarian movement benefited greatly in the 1970s from the support of millionaire industrialist Charles Koch, whose father had been involved with the ultraconservative John Birch Society. With Koch's financial backing, the movement was able to launch a number of projects. Some of these, like the Students for a Libertarian Society and the businessman's Council for a Competitive Economy, were extremely short-lived. Others, including the *Libertarian Review*, a magazine for the movement, and *Inquiry*, a glossy semimonthly intended for a general audience, are still in operation. The Cato Institute, founded in 1976 as a libertarian alternative to the liberal Brookings Institution and the conservative American Enterprise Institute, continues to churn out a steady stream of position papers designed to influence Washington's policy-makers.¹³

It is difficult to say much about the rank and file of the libertarian movement. Demographic studies simply do not exist. Electoral support for the LP, though large by third party standards, is still too slight to register in the national voting studies. The geography of the libertarian vote shows that the party is strongest in the west and especially in California. In 1978, the libertarian gubernatorial candidate in California received nearly 400,000 votes, the best showing for any third party candidate there in almost three decades. Anecdotal information suggests a primary constituency of well-to-do young professionals. Though unsubstantiated by hard data, this assessment seems intuitively plausible given the libertarian equation of personal freedom with the individual's right to any life style he or she can afford. It hardly seems mere coincidence that libertarianism, with its radically individualistic philosophy, emerged as a political force in what has aptly been described as the "Me" decade.

If this reading of the movement's appeal is correct, the typical libertar-

12. Friedrich Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944); Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: New American Library, 1957). For more on their influence among conservatives, see Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, pp. 27-28. For a tongue-in-cheek account of Rand's circle by a conservative author briefly under her spell, see Jerome Tuccille, *It Usually Begins with Ayn Rand* (New York: Stein and Day, 1971).

13. For a profile of the Cato Institute, see George Easterbrook, "Ideas Move Nations," *The Atlantic* (January 1986): 66-80.

ian voter might turn out to be a “Yuppie” not so much frightened by the spectre of totalitarianism as resentful of high taxes, redistributive programs, and paternalistic measures that threaten a preferred style of life. A recent study of ideology in the electorate published by the libertarian Cato Institute allows at least a partial test of this hypothesis. William Maddox and Stuart Lilie employed national opinion data from the Center for Political Studies of the University of Michigan and the National Opinion Research Center to search for libertarian sympathies in the general population. (Their data base does not identify self-declared libertarians and so cannot be used to characterize the movement’s actual constituency.) For their purposes, Maddox and Lilie devised four ideological categories—libertarian, liberal, conservative, and populist—and assigned respondents according to their attitudes toward government intervention in the economy and the expansion of personal freedoms. Persons categorized as libertarians expressed support for the expansions of freedoms but were opposed to government manipulation of the economy. “Liberals” expressed support for both positions, “conservatives” were against both, and “populists” answered in the reverse of libertarians.¹⁴

It is clear from the Maddox-Lilie study that libertarianism, as they define it, is an upper-middle class phenomenon. The authors use three measures of class: respondents’ self-identification, income, and education. The percentage of respondents identifying themselves as middle class among the libertarians outnumbered working class self-identifiers two-to-one throughout the period studied. In contrast, the percentages for each class were roughly equal among both liberals and conservatives, while populists tilted toward the working class. The distribution of ideologies across income levels offers an even more striking contrast. As Maddox and Lilie note for the 1980 data, the proportion of libertarian supporters increases dramatically along with annual income. “Almost nonexistent in the lower levels, libertarianism claims the support of significant minorities [8 to 14 percent] in the middle income brackets [defined by the authors as the range between \$10,000 and \$19,999 per year], about 20 percent of those with upper-middle incomes [\$20,000 to \$34,999], and the lion’s share (36 percent) of those with incomes over \$35,000 per year.”¹⁵ Conservatives claimed only 15 percent of the highest income bracket, populists a mere 11 percent. Liberals, who drew support evenly from all income levels, received roughly one-quarter of the top bracket.

14. William S. Maddox and Stuart A. Lilie, *Beyond Liberal and Conservative* (Washington, DC: The Cato Institute, 1984), p. 5.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

The data for education show libertarianism to be most popular among the most highly educated respondents in the sample. For 1980, 34 percent of those claiming an advanced degree and 32 percent with a college degree were classified as libertarians. Only liberals displayed a similar pattern, while conservatives received under one-fifth of the college educated respondents and populists less than one-tenth. Libertarians and liberals were also found to be younger than conservatives and populists. More than half of those classified as libertarians in 1980 and over two-thirds of those designated liberals were under 41 years of age. The Maddox-Lilie study further suggests that the libertarian constituency is almost entirely white (96 percent of the 1980 sample).¹⁶ These data would appear to lend credence to the Yuppie hypothesis.

Looking forward to a libertarian realignment in American politics, Maddox and Lilie point optimistically to the steady increase of libertarian respondents in their sample between 1972 and 1980. Over that period, libertarian representation almost doubled, rising from 9.4 percent of the sample population to 17.7 percent. The profile of libertarian sympathizers that emerges from their study, however, suggests an elite constituency of limited size. Indeed, there is little if anything in their data on which to build hopes for a mass movement. Nor does their study contain evidence of electoral realignment even among those said to be ideologically attuned to libertarianism. In 1972, three-quarters of those identified as libertarians by Maddox and Lilie voted for Richard Nixon. In 1976 and again in 1980, despite the presence of an LP candidate in the race, two-thirds of these designated "libertarians" in the sample cast their ballots for the Republican candidate. In 1976, only four percent of the supposed libertarians failed to vote for either Ford or Carter, and in 1980 Independent John Anderson and all other minority party candidates, including the LP's Ed Clark, shared 17 percent of the sample's libertarian respondents. While almost half of the libertarians identified by Maddox and Lilie claimed no party affiliation in 1980, 38 percent identified themselves as Republicans and 43 percent described themselves as conservatives.¹⁷

If the LP's actual share of the electorate is taken as a measure of political influence, libertarianism is undoubtedly in decline. In 1984, the LP presidential ticket appeared on the ballot in just thirty-nine states, and

16. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 104, 113, 118. A 1987 Gallup survey commissioned by the Times Mirror company shows 16 percent of the electorate to be libertarian look-alikes called "enterprisers," persons described as affluent, educated, pro-business, and anti-government. *New York Times*, 10 January 1988, p. E35.

the party's popular vote total dropped to 228,000, a poorer showing than in 1976. Ironically, the waning of the LP coincides with the ascendancy of Ronald Reagan's conservative crusade against Big Government. No doubt Reagan cut heavily into the libertarian vote.¹⁸ His antistatist, laissez-faire rhetoric plays to the same constituency. Moreover, his own ideological affinity for libertarianism is reflected in the appointment of libertarian activists to important White House posts. Doug Bandow, former editor of *Inquiry* and senior policy analyst of the Reagan for President Committee, served as special assistant to the President for policy development between 1981 and 1982. Economist William Niskanen sat on the Council of Economic Advisers before leaving the administration to assume command of the Cato Institute, where Bandow is now a senior fellow.

It would be a mistake, however, to overestimate libertarian influence on the Reagan White House or to confuse what has been called the Reagan Revolution with the libertarian agenda. Reaganism is better understood as a New Right cocktail, an electorally intoxicating blend of laissez-faire with anticommunism and traditionalism. The moral tone of New Right politics suggests that the popular revolt against the modern state is not born simply of a passion for the free market or the desire to be left alone to do one's own thing. The moralists of the New Right join libertarian conservatives in asking for less government—not, however, to free the individual from unwarranted restraint, but to allow families, churches, and local communities to reassert their authority and restore moral order.

II.

The New Right is less a political movement than a collection of constituencies mobilized around such highly charged issues as abortion, school prayer, and the now defeated Equal Rights Amendment.¹⁹ The term

18. Relying on a Gallup survey that classifies respondents according to their pro-business, antistatist attitudes (see n. 17), Andrew Kohut and Norman Ornstein report that in 1984 96 percent of the seemingly libertarian "enterprisers" in the electorate voted for Ronald Reagan. Andrew Kohut and Norman Ornstein, "Constructing a Winning Coalition," *Public Opinion* (November/December 1987): 41–44.

19. The list of New Right organizations includes Paul Weyrich's Committee for the Survival of a Free Congress, Howard Phillip's Conservative Caucus, Pat Robertson's Freedom Council, John Dolan's National Conservative Political Action Committee, Jesse Helms's National Congressional Club, and Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority. See Alan Crawford, *Thunder on the Right: The "New Right" and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980); also, Jerome Himmelstein, "The New Right," in *The New Christian*

“New Right” was first applied to these groups in the mid-1970s by journalist Kevin Phillips and was quickly adopted by conservative activists who saw the opportunity to create a powerful political network. Key figures in the organization of the New Right include Richard Viguerie, Senator Jesse Helms, Paul Weyrich, Howard Phillips, and John T. Dolan. All five are life-long conservative activists on the right wing of the Republican party. The New Right network is largely the result of their efforts to forge a hard-line conservative coalition, bringing pressure to bear on the more moderate Republican establishment. In the words of Paul Weyrich, the leaders of the New Right see themselves as “radicals who want to change the existing power structure.”²⁰

Viguerie traces the intellectual origins of the New Right to the thought and politics of William F. Buckley and Barry Goldwater. He may, in fact, be closer to identifying the source of its mass following when he acknowledges the tradition of religious conservatism represented in the New Christian Right of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson.²¹ If the New Right has a truly radical potential as Weyrich claims, it is because of a religious worldview fundamentally at odds with the secular cast of American politics. Modern America is “depraved, decadent, and demoralized,” according to Jerry Falwell, popular television evangelist and founder of the Moral Majority, because a liberal elite, “a godless minority of treacherous individuals,” has been allowed to shape government policy.²² No matter that the New Right is the creature of political professionals in the service of familiar conservative interests. Its fundamentalist partisans are on a symbolic crusade reminiscent of the temperance movement; theirs is a campaign to redefine the values at the core of public life.

From an organizational perspective, the religious right looks much like any other coalition of special interests. Groups like the Moral Majority, the National Christian Action Coalition, and Christian Voice engage in fundraising, lobby the government, give aid to friendly politicians, harass opponents, and educate and mobilize their constituents on issues of importance. Many of these issues, however, are distinguished by their

Right: Mobilization and Legitimation, ed. Robert C. Liebman and Robert Wuthnow (New York: Aldine Publishing Company, 1983), pp. 13–30. John S. Saloma follows the money that supports the New Right in *Ominous Politics: The New Conservative Labyrinth* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984).

20. Quoted in Richard Viguerie, *The New Right: We're Ready to Lead* (Falls Church, VA: The Viguerie Company, 1981), p. 56.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 43. Viguerie describes Falwell's Moral Majority as the New Right's “most important asset” (p. 8).

22. *Ibid.*, from the forward by Jerry Falwell, unpaginated.

high symbolic content, e.g., the Human Life Amendment and the Family Protection Act. Even anticommunism, which translates into support for military spending and a hard-line foreign policy, gains religious significance when the acts of the Soviet Union are seen to confirm Satan's presence in the world. All this suggests less a species of conventional 'interest politics' than what sociologists call "status politics," fueled by cultural anxieties rather than material ambitions.²³ The political revolt of the religious right is fueled by resentment and by the anguish of persons who feel themselves to have been made strangers in their own house. Their professed enemy is a secular, cosmopolitan elite that runs the government, controls the media, and dominates even the marketplace.

While Catholics as well as Protestants provide support for the religious right, fundamentalist Protestants dominate the movement. Their political struggle against the moral depravity of the modern state reflects in part the ongoing confrontation between conservative Protestantism and the forces of modernity in American culture. Sociologist James Davison Hunter explains that although the religious cosmology of Protestant fundamentalism was besieged by the forces of secular modernism throughout the first half of the twentieth century, "the traditional morality of the nineteenth century remained essentially intact." Most Americans remained faithful to such values as premarital chastity, marital fidelity, the undesirability of divorce, and the sanctity of life. But the pace of what Hunter calls the "deinstitutionalization" of this traditional morality began to quicken after World War II and accelerated dramatically in the 1960s and 1970s, as evidenced by the increased divorce rates, the spread of permissive sexual mores, the gay rights movement, the feminist redefinition of traditional gender roles, and the new acceptability of abortion on demand. As Hunter observes, "it is against these forces in American culture that conservative Protestantism presently strives."²⁴

The cultural *angst* at the heart of the New Christian Right finds expression in Jerry Falwell's complaint that "the rising tide of secularism

23. On the concept of status politics and its application to American conservatism, see Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790-1970* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970). For a discussion of status politics and the New Christian Right, see John H. Simpson, "Moral Issues and Status Politics," in *The New Christian Right*, pp. 188-207. Cf. Clarke E. Cochran, Jerry D. Perkins, and Murray Clark Havens, "Public Policy and the Emergence of the Religious Right," *Polity* 19 (Summer 1987): 601-603, 606-608.

24. James Davison Hunter, *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandry of Modernity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983), p. 103. Cf. Erling Jorstad, *The New Christian Right, 1981-1988* (Lewiston/Queenston: Edwim Melen Press, 1987), pp. 198-212.

threatens to obliterate the Judeo-Christian influence on American Society." America, he insists, must be called "back to God, back to the Bible, and back to moral sanity." It is highly revealing that he defines the shared moral concerns of his Moral Majority constituency by listing what its members oppose: "abortion, pornography, the drug epidemic, the breakdown of the traditional family, the establishment of homosexuality as an accepted alternate life-style, and other moral cancers that are causing our society to rot from within."²⁵ When Falwell accuses the Equal Rights Amendment of striking at "the foundations of our entire social structure," or Tim LaHaye declares humanists to be "the most serious threat to our nation in its entire history," they are not merely engaging in rhetorical exaggeration. They speak in deadly earnest.²⁶

The enormity of the stakes as perceived by the religious right is clearly visible in the battle over the schools. Its campaign against "secular humanism" can be seen as an effort by fundamentalist parents to protect their children and their way of life from corrupting influences. In the teaching of evolution, for example, the religious right sees the deliberate subversion of the Biblical account of creation. In court rulings against school prayer it detects a plot to establish secularism as a state "religion." Values clarification, a recent addition to the public school curriculum intended to develop moral reasoning in children, seems to its fundamentalist critics as an attempt to enthrone ethical relativism and disparage Biblical morality. In the words of one disgruntled parent, the contemporary public school curriculum is the result of a liberal conspiracy that has been "working for decades to eradicate every trace of the Judeo-Christian heritage from our national life."²⁷

Conspiratorial thinking of this sort, what Richard Hofstadter characterized as the paranoid style in American politics, makes it tempting to assign the religious right to a place on the lunatic fringe. The available survey data, on the other hand, suggest that the views espoused by Christian Right activists are not so far removed from mainstream opinion. In his analysis of national opinion data from 1977, John H. Simpson found broad support for the Moral Majority platform. Using attitudes toward homosexuality, school prayer, woman's role, and abortion to classify respondents, Simpson identified 72 percent as conservatives either whol-

25. Jerry Falwell, *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), p. 188.

26. Quoted in Hunter, *American Evangelicalism*, pp. 104, 111.

27. Quoted in Edward L. Ericson, *American Freedom and the Radical Right* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1982), p. 4. Cf. Charles Krauthammer, "America's Holy War," *The New Republic*, 9 April 1984, pp. 15-19; and Erling Jorstad, *The New Christian Right, 1981-1988*, ch. 2, 4.

ly subscribing to the views of the Moral Majority or sufficiently similar to those who did to merit inclusion. His conclusions regarding the *breadth* of support for the Moral Majority platform are seconded by Burton Yale Pines, who reviewed Gallup data to examine public attitudes toward abortion, homosexuality, school prayer, sex education, drugs, and pornography. As Simpson is careful to point out, however, we should conclude from these findings not that a majority in the public supports the political goals of the religious right, but that the religious right's moral and social views largely reflect commonly held opinions.²⁸

Surveys examining the *depth* of support for the Moral Majority show it to be relatively shallow even among fundamentalist Protestants. In 1980, only 40 percent of born-again Christians in Gallup's national sample had heard of the Moral Majority and only 26 percent knew its political agenda. Of that informed minority, 13 percent voiced disapproval and only 8 percent expressed support. While these percentages are low, it is worth noting that given an estimated population of 30 million born-again Christians in the United States, the Moral Majority's 8 percent approval rating translates into between 12 and 13 million adult supporters.²⁹

As we might expect, Simpson found that support for the Moral Majority platform is not evenly distributed throughout the general population. Levels of support were found to be highest among non-mainline (fundamentalist) Protestants, the aged, rural dwellers, the working and lower classes, and the poorly educated. Jews and persons giving no religious preference, the young, residents of large urban centers, self-identified members of the upper class, and persons with graduate degrees were the least likely to agree with the views of the Moral Majority. As Simpson observes, the data indicate that support for the religious right appears to be drawn "disproportionately from the periphery of the society and not from the dominant center."³⁰

Conflict originating in the cultural divide between center and periphery is not new to American politics. But if the new conservatism

28. Simpson, "Moral Issues and Status Politics," pp. 188-92. Simpson's data were drawn from the National Opinion Research Center's General Social Survey for 1977; Burton Yale Pines, "A Majority for Morality?" *Public Opinion* (April/May 1981): 42-47.

29. *Gallup Opinion Index*, 184 (January 1981): 57. A 1987 Gallup survey commissioned by the Times Mirror company shows 14 percent of the electorate to be "moralists," persons described as anti-abortion, pro-school prayer, and pro-military. The parallel with data bearing on New Right moralism suggests the outer limits of moralism's electoral appeal. *New York Times*, 10 January 1988, p. E35. Cf. Andrew Kohut and Norman Ornstein, "Constructing a Winning Coalition."

30. Simpson, "Moral Issues and Status Politics," p. 195.

reflects the latest in a long series of populist revolts against entrenched cosmopolitan elites, it also represents something more. New Right moralism challenges the ideological hegemony of the Lockean consensus that defines politics as usual in America. The nature of that challenge is most clearly visible in the selection of the family as a primary political symbol. Once again, Jerry Falwell exemplifies the new conservatism. "No nation has ever been stronger than the families within it," he exclaims. "America's families are its strength, and they symbolize the miracle of America."³¹

There is a certain irony to this invocation of the traditional patriarchal family by American heirs to the politics of Locke's *Second Treatise*. After all, Locke's little-read *First Treatise* was a tedious refutation of Sir Robert Filmer's claim that political authority descends from humankind's biblical patriarch, Adam. Indeed, families, with their unavoidable personal histories of filial obligation, are notably absent from Locke's hypothetical account of original government in the second of his two treatises. This hardly seems accidental. Lockean political theory assumes that individuals are perfectly free, in a psychological as well as a political sense, to enter into the social compact. In the absence of families, there are no prior emotional commitments to rival the system of allegiance founded on the rational consent of self-regarding men and women.³² As a political symbol, family can be read here as a stand-in for the sources of spontaneous loyalty historically associated with traditional (aristocratic) societies. That point is driven home in chapter eight of the *Second Treatise*, "Of the Beginning of Political Societies," where Locke describes the benign rule of a father over his sons as the precursor of monarchy.

The New Right moralists are not the first Americans to resurrect the spirit of Filmer's argument with Locke. In the nineteenth century, there was George Fitzhugh, a champion of antebellum southern society best

31. Falwell, *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon*, p. 205.

32. Within Locke's theoretical universe, kinship ties serve to illustrate a second avenue to political legitimacy existing in tension with the first (rational consent). While it is possible that affect will complement reason, emotionally bonding subjects to a sovereign installed by the social compact, it is also possible that strong sentiments will subvert the calm dictates of rational self-interest, creating patriotic zealots and impassioned revolutionaries. For Locke, the presence of nonrational motives in politics is thus a two-edged sword. In what might be called the "politics of family," Locke discovers the seeds of political fanaticism. At the same time, however, kinship ties evoke sentiments of fraternal affection missing from the coldly rational civil society established by compact. If the politics of family represents a standing threat to Locke's politics of consent, it is also a lasting rebuke to his socially atomizing political individualism.

remembered today for his scathing denunciation of northern capitalism, which he carried so far as to suggest that northern industrial workers would be better off as slaves. Predicting anarchy and class warfare in the north, Fitzhugh explicitly blamed Locke's philosophy for what he deemed "the failure of free society." Central to his critique of Locke was a Filmerian understanding of political authority, which assigned a key role to the benign pater familias who is portrayed by Fitzhugh as a benevolent provider of justice and sustenance to women, children, and slaves. Smiling in the face of hostile abolitionists, he invited the north to save itself by imitating the southern example.³³

In a delicious irony, Fitzhugh's fallen standard was recently picked up on behalf of the New Right by movement theoretician Thomas Fleming. Invoking the "traditional conservatism" of his region, Fleming reiterates Fitzhugh's argument against Locke's philosophy and offers what he chooses to call "the myth of the south" as an alternative to failed "northern" liberalism. Naturally, the family is at the center of Fleming's political vision. Echoing Fitzhugh, Fleming writes that human society is composed not of atomistic individuals, as in Locke's philosophy, but of extended family networks. These play an essential role in the nurture and grooming of individuals for social existence. The great evil of Lockean politics in America, as Fleming sees it, is that the family has been dangerously weakened by rights-oriented government policies that treat family members as isolated individuals. In this manner the liberal state has induced a kind of "social starvation" in the body politic. "Worse than starve," he complains, "we are being poisoned by the raw chemicals of individual rights." As a remedy he proposes to dilute the force of liberal rights-talk by introducing a set of social rights "guaranteeing the existence, integrity, and property of the family."³⁴

Fleming's mythic alternative to Lockean America is a romantic idealization of the south, which he depicts as "a fairy tale place of strong, courageous men and gentle but determined ladies, where land and the family are loved more than money and productivity, where the Constitution is respected more than progress, where there are still a few churches in which the idols of Mammon are not worshiped and the social gospel not preached." If this idealized portrait of southern society is intended as a dig at liberal (northern) jurists and clergy, it is no less a snide put down of the southern conservative's erstwhile ally, the libertarian capitalist. Like Fitzhugh before him, Fleming presents the profit-hungry entre-

33. George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All!* (Richmond, VA: 1857); reprinted in 1960 by the Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 184, 185.

preneur as a greedy and unprincipled seeker after wealth whose motto is "prey or be preyed upon." The traditional southern conservative, on the other hand, is said to live by another, more civilized code. "He is not so delighted with the mobility and tawdriness of modern life, with fast food and fast buck artists who seem intent on turning the New South into a suburb of Chicago."³⁵

These barbed comments suggest an interesting parallel between Fleming and an unlikely ally, the neoconservative intellectual Irving Kristol. Fleming cautions that free enterprise is not "a way of life" and "will not save us from the moral anarchy and governmental despotism that has overtaken us." In a similar vein Kristol warns that the enemy of capitalism is not so much socialism as nihilism, and he laments the entrepreneur's tendency to regard cultural decadence not as a moral ill "but rather as just another splendid business opportunity." Agreeing with critics of bourgeois society that it has squandered "the accumulated moral capital of traditional religion and traditional moral philosophy," Kristol asks Locke's American heirs to acknowledge that "religion, and a moral philosophy associated with religion, is far more important politically than the philosophy of liberal individualism admits."³⁶

Curiously, the religious right seems not to notice the moral contradictions within capitalism that so trouble Kristol and Fleming. On the contrary, Jerry Falwell takes for granted that American capitalism and scriptural morality go hand in hand. He announces confidently to his flock that "the free enterprise system is clearly outlined in the Book of Proverbs" and "Jesus Christ made it clear that the work ethic was part of his plan for man."³⁷ Clearly, Falwell's capitalism does not entail the nihilistic world of hedonistic consumers and profit crazed entrepreneurs that haunt the waking nightmares of a Kristol or a Fleming. Rather, his is the much older capitalism of the Protestant ethic, a moral regimen perhaps no longer practiced by the spoiled children of a middle class grown accustomed to affluence, but evidently still in vogue with his congregation. Francis FitzGerald's remarkable portrait of Falwell's church in Lynchburg, Virginia, strongly suggests that in pursuit of salvation the faithful, many of them only one generation removed from backwoods poverty,

35. Thomas Fleming, "Old Rights and the New Right," in *The New Right Papers*, ed. Robert W. Whitaker (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), p. 184).

36. Fleming, "Old Rights and the New Right," p. 200; Irving Kristol, "Capitalism, Socialism, and Nihilism," in *Two Cheers for Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), p. 61.

37. Quoted in Gillian Peele, *Revival and Reaction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 89.

are acquiring the social skills and self-discipline required for success in a modern economy.³⁸

On this reading, the New Christian Right does not merely recall a previous era in American history, but effectively repeats the nineteenth-century experience for those who were left behind in the march toward industrialism. Residing in areas peripheral to America's earlier economic modernization, these persons have only lately been swept into the twentieth century by the rapid and continuing industrialization of the south and west, where support for the religious right is strongest.³⁹ Religious fundamentalism and the political moralism it generates may be thought to provide them a compass by which to navigate on the seas of modernity and an anchor to prevent their drifting too far toward secular values.

III.

It is noteworthy that New Right moralism and conservative libertarianism reveal their differences so clearly where they appear at first glance to have most in common, namely their support for the free market. Libertarian theorists like Robert Nozick and Friedrich Hayek deny the market any special moral content. Rather, their idea of the market accommodates all moralities equally well, as long as persons observe the procedural constraints governing market transactions. It is precisely this tolerance of a wide variety of moral preferences and their associated life styles that, from a pluralist perspective, makes the libertarian defense of the market so attractive. New Right moralists, on the other hand, invest capitalism with a specific moral content that reflects the teachings of fundamentalist Christianity. In the hands of the New Right the capitalist marketplace becomes a major theater for civic education and cannot be regarded as ethically neutral by the state.

Disagreement over the deeper meaning of *laissez faire* again draws our

38. Francis FitzGerald, "A Disciplined, Charging Army," *The New Yorker*, 18 May 1981, pp. 53-144. Cf. Nelkin's portrait of persons caught up in the creationist movement, *The Creation Controversy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1982), p. 21. According to a 1980 Gallup poll, one-quarter of America's fundamentalist Christians do clerical work, while 21 percent perform manual labor and a like percentage are outside the labor force (this figure most likely represents housewives). In contrast, only 11 percent are classified as professionals.

39. Simpson's data show support for the religious right to be strongest in the South Atlantic, East-South Central and West-South Central regions of the country. See "Moral Issues and Status Politics," p. 194. In 1980, one-third of America's born-again Christians lived in the South, and the Gallup poll found support for the Moral Majority platform to be highest among fundamentalists residing in the South and West. *Gallup Opinion Index*, p. 184 (January 1981), p. 61.

attention to the differences between the separate audiences addressed by libertarians and moralists. Libertarian themes sound the complaints of a wealthy, well-educated middle class constituency unhappy over the cost and paternalistic inclination of the modern state. Radically individualistic, unabashedly hedonistic, libertarians epitomize the cosmopolitan spirit of modern society. They reject the authority of tradition in social practice just as they rebel against the tradition of authority in politics. In contrast, the New Right, and especially the New Christian Right, articulates the anger and frustration of a less well-educated, lower-middle class constituency that has risen in defense of its traditional world view. New Right spokesmen have no sympathy for the social anarchy at the heart of the libertarian antistatism. To the contrary, they look to the state to preserve time-tested values against subversive contemporary trends.

Perhaps the clearest indication of the cultural divide that separates libertarianism from New Right moralism is to be found in the significance each gives to religion. Religious conviction undergirds the New Right, which sees itself on the defensive in a war between traditional faith and contemporary relativism. Libertarianism, on the other hand, is a thoroughly secular doctrine. In the Maddox-Lilie study cited earlier libertarian respondents accounted for one-quarter of all persons in the sample expressing no religious preference.⁴⁰ Secularism complements libertarian individualism insofar as it weakens the capacity of institutional religion to enforce communal norms.

In the quarrel between libertarians and moralists, we hear echoes of a much wider debate in American society over the effects of individualism on community. Social critic Christopher Lasch comments that contemporary American culture has carried the logic of individualism "to the extreme of a war of all against all."⁴¹ Sociologist Robert Bellah and his collaborators in *Habits of the Heart*, a study of individualism and commitment in American life, describe individualism as a cancer eating away at our sense of membership in a civic body. In the tradition of French

40. In 1980, libertarians accounted for 18 percent of the sample's Protestants, 13 percent of its Catholics, and 17 percent of all other religions. Only liberals were comparatively less religious, claiming 37 percent of those with no religious preference. At the same time, however, liberals were also *more* religious than libertarians, having 22 percent of the Protestants, 22 percent of the Catholics, and 41 percent of the non-Christians (mostly Jews). *Beyond Liberal and Conservative*, p. 94.

41. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), p. xv. Robert Bellah and his collaborators in *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) worry that American individualism "may have grown cancerous" (p. viii). At a more philosophical level, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 204-225; 244-55.

sociologist Emile Durkheim, these critics perceive anomie as the psychological consequence of social atomism. And in a critique that invokes the shades of both Marx and Burke, they attribute the dissolution of established social conventions and the atomization of society to the influence of liberal capitalism.

Libertarians differ from these critics of individualism less in their analysis than in their conclusions. Rather than lament the decline of family, church, and community, libertarians celebrate an emerging social order fashioned out of respect for each person's individuality. This hyperindividualistic society resembles nothing so much as Locke's hypothetical starting point, the presocietal state of nature, where autonomous men and women invent and initiate the social compact. For Locke, however, nature represented a prepolitical world, an anarchical condition made intolerable by the prospect of social chaos. To libertarian theorists, it appears to be a model of the world *after* politics, a vision of the self-regulating society that awaits the abolition of the state.

The new state of nature suggested by libertarian theory implicitly relies on what might best be described as a market mentality. It takes for granted that most persons most of the time behave rationally, in an instrumental sense, in the pursuit of their individual ends. Thus, the libertarian universe is peopled by exceedingly cool enthusiasts whose passion for liberty stops short of any emotion that would dissolve the boundary of rights protecting each from the rest. Visited with libertarian grace, saints and sinners can sit down together in mutual forbearance of one another's life styles. It is a fundamental assumption of libertarian politics that warring values will not produce actual warfare if the would-be combatants can no longer hope to enlist the state on their side.

That real people do in fact go to war over moral and religious questions and other equally irrational objects, even where the state is neutral, seems mysterious to libertarian thinkers, a symptom perhaps of false consciousness that will pass away with the state.⁴² Events of this nature have always disturbed and often frightened liberal thinkers. Here we encounter emotions akin to madness in Hobbes's view that have the power to overturn rights and property and even to sweep away individual identity when the zealot becomes one with the mob. Ultimately, the integrity of the entire liberal edifice depends upon the psychic insulation protecting the bourgeois personality from the political effects of such dangerous emotions. It is small wonder that classical liberalism preaches separation of church and state and insists on adherence to the impersonal rule of

42. Rothbard, *For a New Liberty*, p. 196.

law. Libertarianism, self-declared heir to the legacy of classical liberalism, takes these and other hard-won political victories for granted.

Such naiveté is symptomatic of the overconfidence of the liberal tradition in America. The United States, as Louis Hartz argued, is surely the Lockean polity par excellence. Mainstream opinion treats Lockean claims regarding human nature, individual rights, and civil society as simple truisms. In consequence, political appeals that begin by rejecting Locke (as Fitzhugh did by invoking Filmer, and Fleming by invoking Fitzhugh) appear marginal when viewed from the center. To Locke's complacent heirs, the status politics of the religious right must seem a curiosity, a throwback perhaps to the discarded Puritan experiment in theocracy. In fact, this seeming aberration is better understood as the obverse of America's Lockean consensus. The emphasis on communal solidarity intrinsic to New Right moralism addresses the void in American political life encouraged by liberal atomism. In contrast, libertarianism follows the logic of Locke's political individualism to its extremes, culminating in an all-out assault on the affective ties that unite the individual to society.

To speak in terms of proximate causes, the recent conservative revolt against the state is in large measure a reaction to the swelling of government in the 1960s and a series of unhappy events, i.e., the agony of Vietnam, the scandal of Watergate, that damaged the credibility of the modern American state and caused it to suffer a loss of public esteem. Further, as Lowi and Huntington observe, the structure of modern politics invites a crisis. Government unwittingly invites public disaffection through its brokerage relationship to the plethora of special interests. Lacking any set of criteria by which to define the public interest, the state struggles to meet virtually every politically salient demand placed upon its limited resources. Its inevitable failures steadily deplete the reservoir of public trust.⁴³

The broker state is a reflection of the nation's liberal political culture, which has always understood the general welfare in terms of the satisfaction of private interests. As Lowi argues, American liberalism entails a conception of politics modeled on the invisible hand of the marketplace; competition among narrowly partisan interests is generally believed to be self-regulating in such a way as to maximize everyone's well-being. Though essentially a nineteenth-century vision, this liberal "public philosophy," updated to accommodate modern pressure groups and the

43. Theodore J. Lowi, *The End of Liberalism*; Samuel P. Huntington, "The Democratic Distemper," in *The American Commonwealth*, 1976, ed. Nathan Glazer and Irving Kristol (New York: Basic Books, 1976), pp. 9-38.

interventionist state, still defines the contours of American politics. Ironically, then, the contemporary legitimization crisis in America is in large measure a product of the nation's fidelity to its Lockean past.

The moralists of the New Right intuitively sense this and respond with a more-or-less deliberate rejection of liberal conventions. Libertarians, however, mistake the liberal character of modern government. In their view, its guiding spirit belongs not to Locke but to de Maistre or Stalin. Thus, while the New Right gropes for alternatives to liberalism, libertarians urge a return to liberal first principles. In the last analysis, neither is able to transcend or resolve the dilemma confronting the American Right. The stateless or near-stateless libertarian utopia of free-spirited individualists abandons the traditional conservative attachment to stability and order, while the New Right quest for a morally regenerate polity implicitly challenges the nation's historic commitment to liberal tolerance and pluralism. The one brings conservatism so close to the spirit of American liberalism that it risks losing all distinctiveness, the other takes conservatism so far from Locke's legacy that it risks separation from the political mainstream.

Finally, in the divided mind of the American Right, we perceive the Scylla and Charybdis of America's Lockean political tradition. These are twin dangers born of and in reaction to liberal individualism. One is a political tendency that endangers the cohesion of civil society by placing the individual above the community; the other is a reciprocal tendency that subordinates the freedom of the individual to the moral integrity of the group. The one risks anomie, the other a stifling conformism. All who navigate the waters of American politics must negotiate these straits; libertarians and moralists run perilously close to the shoals.